Is there a difference between lower level and higher level characters (newbies and experts) in terms of whether they held on to seemingly "worthless" items and the reasons they gave for keeping those items?

As part of the Games+Learning+Society (GLS) Conference 4.0 in July 2008, we took part in a Real Time Research Activity. As a team decision, we chose a set of cards made up of constructivism/situated cognition, ethnography, interview and survey, and World of Warcraft (WOW). Within this general framework, we brainstormed what topics each of us was interested in looking into. Among the five original researchers, four of us had advanced at least one character to level 70 (the maximum character level at the time of our study) in WOW. One of the authors has studied (inter)actions in the virtual worlds Second Life and Quest Atlantis for over 6 years. One topic that stood out in particular was the underlying human characteristics that keep gamers engaged, either combating or working tightly together in guilds.

The ecological psychological concept of “meaning making” and “value-realizing” in human activities appeared to be sufficient and satisfying to dissipate our puzzle (Gibson, 1979; Reed, 1996), specifically, Reed’s account of collective appropriation of affordances, Hodges and Baron’s (1992) account of values as multiple, heterarchical and dynamical constraints on actions and interactions, Hodges and Lindhiem’s (2006) account of carrying as value-realizing activity, and Hodges’ (2007) account of caring to go on in conversing. Grounding our thinking in ecological terms, we shared our experiences in WOW and virtual worlds in terms of our emotional engagement, things we carry in our packs, people we have the most interaction with, and so on. One of the members mentioned he carried a worthless item, a cracked bill, in his pack because his character’s first name was Bill. So we
began to discuss what people might carry in their packs, which held personal value to them but had little functional value in the game (i.e., those items not directly related to the dominant terms of progress in WOW via gameplay, such as combat, active quest items, profession advancement, or in-game profiteering via selling to other players).

**Methods**

Similar to our switch from Constructivism to Ecological Psychology in the theoretical perspectives, we also modified both ethnographic and survey data collection techniques to accommodate our real-time data collection in the GLS 3-day conference. We had one and a half days to grab people on the fly during session breaks, at lunch and breakfast tables, and in the game room (GLS has a game room set up with any game you name for conference attendees to take action in playing). As a result, a qualitative short interview questionnaire in the form of short survey items (see Table 1) seemed to be suitable for the nature of the study and the context where research took place.

The questionnaire asked,

“In WOW, on your main character, name one object you regularly carry in your inventory that has nothing to do with advancing. It must be something useless in combat or combat support. One item only please.”

We also asked people to give their main character’s level, race, class, last login, when they got the item, and if they had ever passed on a green (uncommon) item or higher to keep it. While the question was emergent, it seemed to be focused on differences in players, their levels, and their reasons for valuing particular items.

In order to gather the data we followed several steps. Each of the five members of our group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Main Character Level</th>
<th>#</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Class</td>
<td>Short Text</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td>Short Text</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When was the last time you logged on?</td>
<td># in Days [estimate]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In WOW, on your main character, name one object you regularly carry in your inventory that has nothing to do with advancing. It must be something useless in combat or combat support. One item only please.</td>
<td>Text</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why do you like the object?</td>
<td>Any length response, use back if you like.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What level did you get it?</td>
<td>#</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have you ever passed up green item [or higher] to keep it?</td>
<td>Yes or No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. The WOW survey used.
distributed surveys and asked people at the conference to either fill them out themselves or group members filled them out as they conversed with conference goers. Some surveys were left on clipboards. Participants received stickers for participating. However, gathering the information was not as straightforward as simply asking questions about a character. As Brown and Thomas (2009) have discussed, playing a character is an act of being the character, so we were touching on something personal which had often involved a large time outlay for the participants. This time outlay was evidenced by the time it took to answer the questions. Intense conversations occurred about characters, class, how items were acquired, and why they were kept. These conversations could last for fifteen minutes or more. In some cases it was deemed necessary by the participant to show the interviewer the character and item on computers provided at the conference. Thus, data collection often took the form of listening to and asking further questions about participants’ recalled stories surrounding the item’s history and context. In this sense, our study elicited what Gee (2007) calls “embodied stories” of video gaming in which experiential, emergent meaning is constructed based on in-game events.

After a day and a half of gathering data, 70 surveys were collected. The group sat down with the surveys and copied the items and reasons for keeping the items. Some items were excluded as they were skinning knives or mining picks, which actually do have a value concerning professions. Once these items were excluded we had 37 items and reasons listed out of 70 surveys. An example of an item and reason would be “I’ve been carrying this lieutenant’s insignia I got in Durotar since level 8 just in case it’s useful” or “I got this cool pet earlier in the game you remember at the end of year one.”

Findings

We anticipated that a high-level player would have fewer items with emotional ties because bag space (at the time of this writing) is at a premium at higher levels. Stories of players having to clean out and organize their bags to prepare for a raid (large group events) – or worse, forgetting to do so and having to run home to a bank – are legendary in the WOW community. However, we found that almost all players had a few items that they held onto for various non-utilitarian reasons.

We did not find any correlation in items kept or reasons for keeping them related to level or time playing the game. Overall, the reasons were highly personal; typically, the items related to a personally important event in the game or had been kept so long as to take on personal meaning. Reasons given in the survey included aesthetics (“looks awesome” or “cute”), performances of social capital (“not many people have it” or “needed reputation to get it”), humor and amusement (“funny,” “whimsical,” or “humorous visual effect”), individual or group identification (relates to character name or guild affiliation), and emotional attachment (“made the game more human” or “gives me a sense of belonging”). Additionally, 35% of survey respondents reported they would pass on a green item or higher to keep the item mentioned.
It can take 240 or more hours for a player to take a character from level 1 to 70. What we did not perhaps fully grasp at the time of the study itself was the truly personal experience we were touching on. At the time of the event itself, we speculated that we could have asked different questions or perhaps shortened the questionnaire, but did not understand what we were getting at in terms of a broader concept of *valuation*. Were we to have added what items do you keep in your office, bedroom, or house that you have refused to get rid of numerous times, and why do you keep them, we may have come closer to understanding the participants and their rationale for hanging onto what, by all definitions, can only be considered *mementos*.

**Conclusions and Next Steps**

Our initial research question was, “Is there a difference between higher and lower level characters in WOW and the non-functional items they keep or their reasons for doing so?” In the end, there was no correlation between level, race, or time played to show why they kept an item. Most people had a worthless item, and they all had a personal story that they loved sharing to explain why they kept it. Along similar lines, Hodges and Lindhiem’s (2006) study revealed that participants were rated more careful in carrying invisible children across uneven steps than grocery bags or trash. Discussing this result, Hodges and Lindhiem reflected that there are many variables that affect the carefulness rating. Among them, the motion movement can reveal something of the content of what is carried. Regardless of the observed differences between perceptual and behavioral critical action boundaries, social engagement is crucial. Social engagements, such as trust between a guild leader and guild members and the cooperation between the guild members, together with moral dimensions are important constraints on actions. In other words, the things that gamers carry in their inventories can have social impact and thus can possibly alter gaming behaviors in significant ways. A possible parallel application of their research findings to our current study might be to collect a larger N and replicate the study, potentially yielding findings that bear on the issue of whether or not the mementoes we carry around in-game make a difference in relation to our perception and action boundaries in individual questing or group battles. Another interesting question might be whether items that players carry can boost their avatar’s self-efficacy. In other words, will the players feel more confident, comfortable and caring in some uncomfortable situations with these items in their inventory?

Something we did not examine in this small study was the affordances an MMORPG could have for emotional attachment. Such emotional attachment may have great implications for educators as they attempt to integrate digital technologies into their instruction. How can we elicit positive feelings in learning so that it has real import? The stories told about seemingly worthless items held value for the players interviewed just as mementoes do for many in the real world.

We believe that there would be value in repeating this study with small samples; however, there should be some revision. As mentioned above there did not seem to be a correlation
with race, character class, or time played in the attachment to an item, so it appears following those hypotheses would yield little knowledge. However, perhaps asking about an item and its importance in the game as well as in the real world may create a clearer understanding of how people view their online versus real life (social) encounters and whether they perceive a difference in value between the two. It might be revealing to report cases of how high-level players perceive their longest carried items as opposed to lower level players. The aim of understanding how novice players become experts in the spirit of legitimate peripheral participation may shed light on how we scaffold novice learners in communities of practice in educational settings (Lave & Wenger, 1991)

Age or generation might be one important factor to consider in such future investigations, however. As Angela Thomas (2007) has touched on, younger people see little delineation between online and real world encounters. Thus, including age as a variable would help further interrogate the possible connections between “real” and virtual systems of value and meaning making.

Note: This study is blended as a collaborative effort and the order of authorship is alphabetical. We would also like to thank William Chamberlain and Lisa Nakamura's participation in the initial research, design, and data collection.

References


